

Clayton Schools prepare for countywide redistricting

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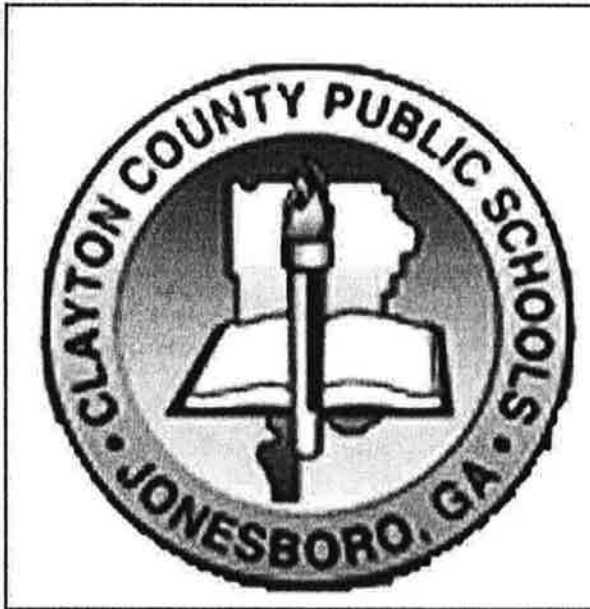


Photo by Heather Middleton

By Curt Yeomans

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Clayton County school officials will spend the next 18 months reviewing, and redrawing, attendance zones for all of their 61 schools, to evenly spread out more than 50,000 students, Superintendent Edmond Heatley said this week.

Officials hope to correct attendance imbalances that have left some schools overcrowded, while others are under their capacity, the superintendent told members of the Clayton County Board of Education, on Monday.

He added that redrawing attendance lines will be an "in-house" initiative, conducted by school officials, using the district's "Edulog" transportation mapping system. Heatley said

the effort will begin after 2010 census data is released for Clayton County.

"As we go forth, and try to be more fiduciary in our spending," he said, "I'm asking the board to allow us to look into consideration of rezoning and redistricting, so we'll have clean feeder patterns, as well as having a discussion about what to do with the empty seats, and how to bring maximum capacity ..."

As the school district goes through the process, its officials will look at the possibility of closing schools, to reduce the occurrence of empty seats in Clayton County classrooms, Heatley told the school board members.

Although he did not give an exact figure for how many empty seats there are, he did say there are more than 15,000 empty seats in the county's elementary schools.

"We now have to figure out, 'You're creating more empty seats, so what are you going to do with the facilities?'" Heatley said.

School System Spokesman Charles White said the superintendent came up with empty-seat figure by multiplying the number of classrooms in each school, by the maximum

number of seats that can be fitted in a classroom. Heatley then compared it to the number of students enrolled at each school, the district's spokesman added.

Heatley's estimate was an eyebrow-raising figure, with School System Chief Operations Officer Cephus Jackson expressing skepticism about the accuracy of the numbers, on Wednesday. "That seems a little high," Jackson said.

The chief operations officer said he did not work with the superintendent to come up with the estimate, and suggested that while the total figure for all school types may be in the thousands, it is possibly lower than Heatley's 15,000 reference for the elementary schools alone.

Several parents and students have argued, in recent years, that their schools are overcrowded. As recently as the fall of this year, Morrow High School parents and students complained that their school is overcrowded and cramped.

Numbers aside, redistricting could give the school system a chance to straighten out attendance zones that have, sometimes, left people scratching their heads. In one example, when boundaries in the county's panhandle region were redrawn to account for the Eddie J. White K-8 Academy, the redrawn attendance zones left Lovejoy Middle School a couple hundred yards outside of its own attendance zone.

School Board Chairperson Pamela Adamson, who represents the panhandle area, and school board member, Jessie Goree, called on district officials to take a hard look at redrawing the boundaries for the K-8 school.

"I really hope that you would take a look at the Eddie J. White K-8 Academy, so a child who starts there in kindergarten can go all the way through the eighth-grade ... because the zoning is different for the middle grades, than for the elementary grades," Adamson said.

Goree later added, "We have people that actually live next door to [Eddie J. White K-8 Academy], and cannot attend the school, because of the way the attendance zones exist ... That's a school where we really need to look at zones right away."

She added that public forums should be held when tentative plans begin to form, so "there won't be any surprises" for parents when a redistricting plan is put in place.

But, Heatley's been criticized for redistricting, and for school closings in the past. When he was the superintendent of the Chino Valley (Calif.) Unified School District, before coming to Clayton County in 2009, Heatley sought to shut down three neighborhood elementary schools, and faced organized resistance from parents.

School board member, Alieka Anderson, noted that other school systems in the Atlanta area, including neighboring DeKalb County, for example, are looking at closing schools, and redistricting.

"You know everybody wants their school to stay in their district, so we just want to prepare everybody, to let them know some schools may close," Anderson said.

BOE approves new map for school board districts

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By Jeylin White (262)

As of Tuesday, January 31, 2012

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Clayton County Board of Education members approved a new map, Monday night, that redraws school board voting districts, with the goal of evening out the disparities in populations among the current districts.

According to the school system's attorney, Glenn Brock, the process is mandated every 10 years, following the U. S. Census.

Brock said that, with the upcoming school board elections, the board is required by law to approve the voting-district map before qualifying for the elections begin. The new map, he said, will now be sent to the local legislative delegation for legislative approval, and then to the U.S. Department of Justice for its stamp of approval — a process that could take up to 120 days.

He said the proposed map will even out the population of voters in the nine districts, and individual board members will have to serve within their new districts.

For example, Board Chairperson Pam Adamson, who represents District 1, saw a dramatic decrease in the population she serves, as it went from 37,680 residents, to 28,291. On the other hand, Board Member Michael King, of District 4, will see an increase in population, from 21,551, to 29,009.

"Those, who are running for election, must live in a particular district," said Brock. "Maybe last time, [one] lived in District 4. This time [that person] might be in District 7." With the population evened out, he said, the new map will give each voter an equal opportunity.

However, King had reservations about the new map, noting that he was concerned about the voting strength of Hispanics and Asians, particularly Hispanics, in his district. He said the Hispanic voting strength might discourage Hispanics from running for the school board.

Adamson said some of the board members will have different district's they will have to serve, but, for the most part, the changes are a subtle shift. She said, in comparison to the old district map, the new map is a lot more reasonable.

"There were some districts [lines] that were long and skinny with a big crook," said Adamson. "Now, they look more blocked [on the map]."

Board Member Charlton Bivins asked Brock if the new map will change the board members' responsibilities and duties. Clayton County Public School Superintendent Edmond Heatley responded, and said he would have to research that information and get back to the school board.

The next rezoning matter the board will have to deal with is school attendance zones, Adamson said. She said board members are currently in the beginning of that process, which could take up to two years to complete. "Some schools are so over-crowded, and some are under-populated," she said.

She said the need to rezone the schools became obvious after the Eddie White Academy was built. The lines on the old map are "crooked," she said, and did not allow students, who lived within a mile of Eddie White, to attend that school.

"We really have to look at the whole county and the population shift," she said. "This will be a long process, but it will be open to the public."

The population breakdowns of the school board districts under the new map are:

- District 1 — 28,291.
- District 2 — 28,984.
- District 3 — 28,286.
- District 4 — 29,009.
- District 5 — 29,011.
- District 6 — 28,822.
- District 7 — 28,353.
- District 8 — 29,353.
- District 9 — 29,315.

Legislators approve Clayton BOC redistricting map

But school board's map faces uncertain future

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By Curt Yeomans (381)

As of Friday, March 16, 2012

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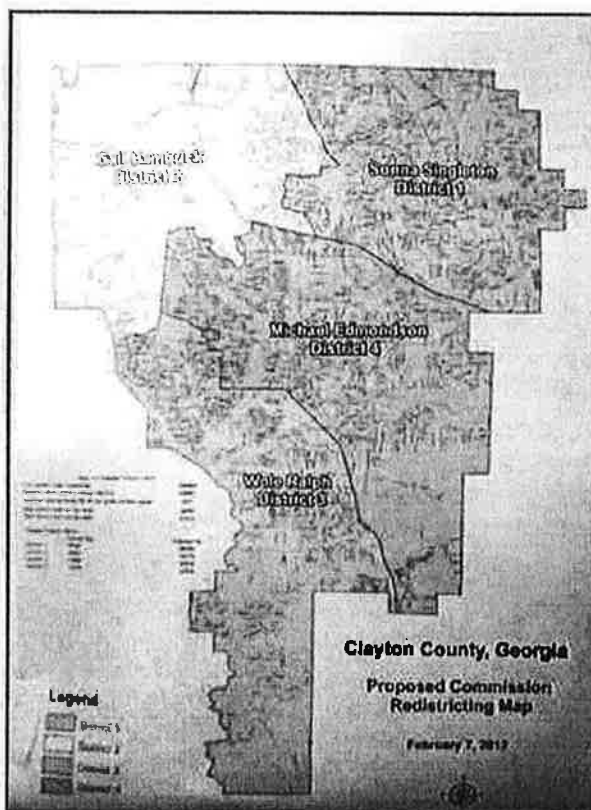


Photo by Curt Yeomans This proposed re-districting map shows the new, planned boundaries for Clayton County's commission districts. The Georgia General Assembly has approved the map, and it is now awaiting Gov. Nathan Deal's signature. The U.S. Department of Justice must then OK it.

The redistricting map for the Clayton County Board of Commissioners cleared a big hurdle toward becoming a reality this week when the Georgia Senate approved legislation that redrew the county's proposed districts.

The Senate approved the map on Tuesday, following the state House of Representatives' decision to OK the redistricting plan on March 7. The key changes to the commission districts under the plan include moving western Jonesboro, and much of Lovejoy from Commission Vice Chairman Wole Ralph's district, to Commissioner Michael Edmondson's district. The commissioners set the map on Feb. 7.

Legislative approval was a key step in getting the county's four commission districts set in stone for the next decade, but there are still two more hurdles at the state and federal levels, which must be cleared.

"It'll go to Gov. [Nathan] Deal for his signature, and we don't expect any real problems there," said State Rep. Roberta Abdul-Salaam (D-Riverdale), the Clayton County Legislative Delegation's chairperson. "After the governor signs off on it, it goes to the [U.S.] Department of Justice for final approval."

Clayton County, like other counties across the state, had to submit redrawn county commission and school board lines for state and federal approval, as part of the once-every-10 years re-districting process. The state's legislative and congressional districts underwent redistricting last year. All of the seats that needed redistricting had to be redrawn based upon 2010 U.S. Census figures.

Many of the legislators' approved redistricting maps for county commissions and school boards are awaiting Deal's signature, so it remains to be seen how long it will take him to sign the Clayton commission's redistricting legislation. Abdul-Salaam said she does not expect the Department of Justice to take long to approve the map once it is OKed by the governor.

Georgia is one of several southern states which must seek Justice Department approval of redistricting maps, under the terms of the federal Voting Rights Act, because of its history with "Jim Crow" laws that discriminated against minorities.

"It [Justice Department review] usually doesn't take too long because most of it is now done electronically," Abdul-Salaam said. "We don't anticipate any problems with receiving approval."

She added, however, that time is limited because two of the four commission districts are up for re-election this year, and qualifying for those seats will occur later this spring. The state's primary elections will take place on July 31. "I do believe it's got to be done soon if it's going to be effective for the elections in July," the state representative said.

Commission Chairman Eldrin Bell said he was cautiously holding back from celebrating the General Assembly's approval of the redistricting map, however. "We all have to wait to see what the Justice Department says," he said.

He said he was concerned about "equity," however, in case the new map is not set in stone in time for the elections. That would mean people in Lovejoy, for example, might have to vote for the commission's District 3 seat (Ralph's seat) this year, even though the new map could be approved shortly thereafter — which would move them to District 4 (Edmondson's district).

But, while the commission map is moving forward toward final approval, the Clayton County Board of Education's map has gone nowhere. The school board approved its own redistricting in January, but no legislation has been introduced to approve that redistricting plan. With only a handful of days left in the current legislative session, Abdul-Salaam said "no changes will be made" to the school board district's map this year.

She declined to elaborate as to why no school board redistricting legislation has been introduced, but she did say "they [the school system] didn't do the proper paperwork" needed to get the legislation created.

The school board's chairperson, Pam Adamson, and its attorney, Glenn Brock, refuted that claim, however. They said a map, and a school board resolution, were submitted to the delegation. Adamson added that the district got little feedback from the delegation on the status of the school board's redistricting efforts.

"We've done everything they've asked us to do," she said. "I don't know what else we could have done."

It is unclear what will happen to the school system if the General Assembly does not approve legislation to redraw the school board's districts. Abdul-Salaam said the Justice Department could step in and issue a ruling on the issue, but she was not sure if the department would redraw the boundaries for the school district.

Brock, too, said he was unsure of what the next steps would be, adding that he would have to look into it next week.

"One thing is for certain, that is the districts can't stay the way they are," he said.

Federal judge: Stop Clayton BOE elections immediately

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By Curt Yeomans (381)

As of Thursday, May 24, 2012

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A federal judge has ordered Clayton County elections officials to postpone indefinitely the elections for five seats on the county's nine-member school board because their districts are based on 12-year old population data and likely violate the U.S. Constitution.

Federal District Court Judge Charles A. Pannell, Jr., issued an injunction against this year's school board elections late Tuesday afternoon after hearing arguments from attorneys for Clayton County Public Schools and Clayton County government that the elections should be halted.

The key issue behind both sides' arguments, and Pannell's order, is that the school board's district are currently based on population data from the 2000 Census, after the Georgia General Assembly did not take up requested legislation to redraw the boundaries this year.

The judge wrote in his order that the 2010 Census shows the county's nine school board districts are now grossly out of proportion, with 37,000 people living in the largest district, while 22,000 people live in the smallest district.

"The court finds that there is a substantial likelihood that the variances violate the 'one-person, one-vote' principle of the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, because the voting strength of individual voters in some districts would be disproportionately less than that of individual voters in other districts," Pannell wrote.

The legal wrangling threw a bit of chaos and uncertainty into the first day of qualifying for local and state elections.

An hour after qualifying began Wednesday, a county elections official distributed a notice from the county, to the Clayton County Democratic and Republican parties, advising them of the situation and telling them to qualify candidates at their discretion, according to County Elections and Registration Director Annie Bright.

The Democratic Party has not been listing school candidates among their qualified candidates, and no Republicans have qualified for any local offices so far.

School board members Mary Baker, Ophelia Burroughs, Trinia Garrett, Jessie Goree, and Wanda Smith are up for re-election this year. "These [existing boundaries] are not constitutional," said School Board Chairperson Pamela Adamson. "They have to be re-balanced."

At 5 p.m., Wednesday, Bright was still waiting to receive Pannell's order as her office closed for the day. Even though she expected the judge to issue an injunction, she said she was unsure of when the school board elections would be allowed to take place. She said was waiting instruction from the judge as to how to proceed.

A second order issued by Pannell on Wednesday afternoon orders the county's elections officials, and school system officials, to confer and create — by May 31 — a scheduling order which takes into account the school board's request for approval of a new re-districting map; notification to voters regarding "their right to seek to intervene in this matter," and a deadline for people to voice their opinions.

A date for a hearing to approve the map, and any relevant local, state and federal balloting deadlines must also be included in the scheduling list, according to Pannell's order.

The school board re-districting map issue has been an ongoing saga for months. The school board approved a new map, which they argued was based on 2010 Census data, in January and they then submitted it to the Clayton County Legislative Delegation for legislative approval. It was never brought forth as a piece of legislation, however.

In March, State Rep. Roberta Abdul-Salaam (D-Riverdale), the chairperson of the Clayton County Legislative Delegation, repeatedly said the school board had not properly submitted all of the paperwork needed to have legislation drafted to approve the re-districting map.

That's a claim school system officials have denied.

Adamson said a new school board re-districting map will have to be drawn by Pannell before the elections could resume, which could mean the primary elections for the school board may not take place until sometime after the statewide July 31 primary.

"He alone has the authority to redraw the map ... so I'm not sure how long it will take for this to work out," the board chairperson said.

A key fear among school system leaders which prompted them to seek the injunction, according to Adamson, is that any decision made by the school board after Jan. 1, 2013, would be open to legal challenges, if this year's elections were allowed to continue without re-districting.

"Any action the board took, starting in January, could have its validity challenged if we don't have the districts redrawn," she said.

But, another concern to Pannell was how voters would suffer if the elections were allowed to continue without the courts mandating changes to the school board's districts.

"Without the injunctive relief requested by the plaintiffs, irreparable harm will occur in that the voters of Clayton County will have their rights to meaningfully participate in the election at issue infringed," the judge wrote.